

# Really Free

## Compelling Question

What do *freedom* and *really free* mean in the U.S.?

### State Standard(s)

Ohio/High School/American History Content Statements 12 & 27  
Kentucky/HS.UH.CH.1; HS.UH.I.UE.3; HS.UH.I.CC.1

### C3 Framework Indicator(s)

D1.1.9-12; D2.His.1.9-12; D3.3.9-12; D4.3.9-12

### Learning Goals

#### Students will understand

- The complexity of *freedom* in the U.S.
- That Black Americans did not obtain complete freedom with Reconstruction.
- That Black Americans lost freedoms under Jim Crow.
- That the Civil Rights Era made progress towards freedom for Black Americans.
- That Black Americans continue to fight for freedom.
- That art can be an expression of freedom.

#### Students will be able to

- Analyze and discuss the concepts of *freedom* and *really free* as they apply to U.S. citizens (Reconstruction – today).
- Draw conclusions from a timeline.
- Make inferences and draw conclusions from text.
- Construct an evidence-based claim.
- Assess how understandings of freedom impact social justice.
- Generate awareness for an issue outside of the classroom.

### Supporting Question

What is *freedom* in the U.S.?

### Featured Sources

- **Freedom Quotes:**  
<https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/freedom-quotes>

### Supporting Question

How might have personal and historical events influenced Nellie Mae Rowe's interpretation of *really free*?

### Featured Sources

- **Primary source:** Art of Nellie Mae Rowe  
[soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/nellie-mae-rowe](https://soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/nellie-mae-rowe)

### Supporting Question

Is there a difference between *freedom* and *really free* in the U.S.?

### Featured Sources

- **Video:** *What are the legacies of the civil rights movement?*  
[youtube.com/watch?v=lwsEN1d0cTE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwsEN1d0cTE)

Featured Sources (cont.)	Featured Sources (cont.)	Featured Sources (cont.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Essay:</b> “Freedom in the Written Word” <a href="https://constitutioncenter.org/media/files/Winner_12th_grade_essay_(1).pdf">constitutioncenter.org/media/files/Winner_12th_grade_essay_(1).pdf</a></li> <li>■ <b>Video:</b> <i>Defining Freedom</i> <a href="https://facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/lessons/defining-freedom">facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/lessons/defining-freedom</a></li> <li>■ <b>Webpages:</b> “White Only: Jim Crow in America” and “Separate but Equal: The Law of the Land” <a href="https://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/white-only-1.html">americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/white-only-1.html</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Video:</b> <i>Curator Video Diary: Who is Nellie Mae Rowe?</i> <a href="https://facebook.com/HighMuseumofArt/videos/curator-video-diary-who-is-nellie-mae-rowe/1474008222988381/">facebook.com/HighMuseumofArt/videos/curator-video-diary-who-is-nellie-mae-rowe/1474008222988381/</a></li> <li>■ <b>Webpage:</b> Civil Rights timeline <a href="https://history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement">history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement</a></li> <li>■ <b>Webpage:</b> Post-Civil Rights timeline <a href="https://history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-timeline-post-civil-rights">history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-timeline-post-civil-rights</a></li> <li>■ <b>Primary source text:</b> <i>An Interview with Nellie Mae Rowe</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Video:</b> <i>Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise</i> clips <a href="https://pbs.org/show/black-america-mlk-and-still-i-rise/extras/season/1/">pbs.org/show/black-america-mlk-and-still-i-rise/extras/season/1/</a></li> <li>■ <b>Primary source:</b> <i>Freedom Charter, South Africa</i> <a href="https://facinghistory.org/confronting-apartheid/chapter-2/freedom-charter">facinghistory.org/confronting-apartheid/chapter-2/freedom-charter</a></li> </ul>
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Part II: Defining Freedom</i> viewing guide</li> <li>■ Jim Crow Era guide</li> <li>■ Class “freedom” list</li> <li>■ Discussion observations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Viewing Guide</li> <li>■ Comparing Timelines: Nellie Mae Rowe and the Civil Rights Era guide</li> <li>■ Discussion observations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Discussion observations</li> <li>■ Venn Diagram</li> </ul>

<p><b>Summative Performance Task</b></p>	<p><b>ARGUMENT:</b> What do freedom and <i>really free</i> mean in the U.S.? Use the completed Venn Diagram to construct an evidence-based claim.</p> <p><b>EXTENSION:</b> What does <i>really free</i> mean to you? Create an art project using the style of Nellie Mae to portray your definition. Explain how the art piece reflects your definition.</p>
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<p><b>Taking Informed Action</b></p>	<p><b>UNDERSTAND:</b> Why is it beneficial for U.S. citizens to consider the question - What do freedom and <i>really free</i> mean in the U.S.?</p> <p><b>ASSESS:</b> Do U.S. citizens agree on the definition of freedom? Evidence? Is social justice impacted by people’s understanding and application of freedom? Evidence? Whose voices/stories haven’t we considered?</p> <p><b>ACT:</b> Display the claims and art pieces in a public forum to encourage people to consider the question - What do freedom and <i>really free</i> mean in the U.S.?</p>
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## Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of the concept of *freedom* and how it has applied to U.S. citizens, specifically white and Black Americans, since the Revolutionary War. C3 indicator D2.His.1.9-12 has students evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place. In this inquiry, students will evaluate how the concept of *freedom*, as it was applied to white and Black Americans, was shaped by the Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights and Post-Civil Rights Eras.

To further challenge students, the art and life of folk artist Nellie Mae Rowe (1900-1982) provides a means for exploring the concept of *really free*, which is compared to the U.S. concept of *freedom*. Incorporating Nellie Mae Rowe in the inquiry also provides opportunity for cross disciplinary study with art. In this inquiry, students are tasked with producing art that expresses their personal concept of *really free*. Cross-disciplinary study could amplify student understanding of the assignment and their confidence in presenting their art when taking informed action at the end of the inquiry.

Students will engage in social justice work by participating in civic discourse regarding *freedom*, and by critically examining how the concept has been applied to white and Black citizens over time. Throughout the inquiry, students will engage in critical literacy and make connections between past and current events. Students will generate change by using their developed claims and art to engage the public in reflection regarding the concept of *freedom* in the U.S.

This inquiry embodies the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center's principle of perseverance by highlighting the story and art of Nellie Mae Rowe, a Black female artist who used her later years to pursue the art mediums she enjoyed as a child. Having experienced Jim Crow, Civil Rights, and Post-Civil Rights Eras, Nellie Mae Rowe's reflection of *really free* embodies the perseverance she needed to accomplish her goals.

We encourage teachers and students to visit our museum and explore how the concept of *freedom* evolved between the Revolutionary War and Reconstruction Eras. Visitors can also learn how modern unfreedoms plague our world by exploring our *Invisible: Slavery Today* exhibit.

## Required Prior Knowledge

To engage in this inquiry, students will require general understandings about U.S. History through the Civil Rights Era. Opportunities to review Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and Civil Rights are built into the lesson, but the inquiry was not designed to provide comprehensive study of these eras. This inquiry was written to be implemented directly after learning about Civil Rights, so that students can evaluate the impact of the Civil Rights Era and the deliberate historical actions taken to control how *freedom* is experienced in the U.S.

## Staging The Compelling Question

Begin by asking students to either brainstorm or free write about the word *freedom*. An explanation of free writing can be found at <https://writingprocess.mit.edu/process/step-1-generate-ideas/instructions/freewriting>. Next, engage students in creating a class list of ideas and concepts related to *freedom*. Consider using the following prompts to generate ideas: Is it an action? Is it a person? Is it a place? Is it a thing/object? Is it an idea/concept? Does it include responsibilities, or does it mean you can do what you want?

Then, distribute quotes that address freedom and have students compare and contrast the different explanations. Quotes can be found at <https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/freedom-quotes>. Have students determine if additional information should be captured on the class list for freedom. Engage in a conversation about the multiple meanings of the concept and the ease or difficulty of explaining or defining it. Introduce the inquiry by providing the compelling question: What do freedom and *really free* mean in the U.S.?

## Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question – What is freedom in the U.S.? – has students examine how the concept of freedom was defined in the United States by the Founding Documents, and how the concept evolved through

Reconstruction and Jim Crow Eras. By examining this question:

- **Students will understand** the complexity of freedom in the U.S.
- **Students will understand** that Black Americans did not obtain complete freedom with Reconstruction.
- **Students will understand** that Black Americans lost freedoms under Jim Crow.
- **Students will be able to** analyze and discuss the concepts of freedom and *really free* as they apply to U.S. citizens (Reconstruction – today).

Engage students in a discussion using the following prompts:

- What does freedom mean in the U.S.? Is it clearly defined?
- What did freedom mean when the Founding Documents were written? Who did it apply to?
- Has the meaning changed over time?

Next, students should appraise the essay “Freedom in the Written Word” ([constitutioncenter.org/media/files/Winner\\_12th\\_grade\\_essay\\_\(1\).pdf](https://constitutioncenter.org/media/files/Winner_12th_grade_essay_(1).pdf)) written by then high school senior Leah Eckman and first place winner of the 2014-2015 National Constitution Center Essay Contest. Ask students to explain how they agree or disagree with the essay.

Introduce the Reconstruction Era as a case study to test the Revolutionary Era concept of freedom established in the Founding Documents. Students should watch the Facing History and ourselves video (14:46): *Part II Defining Freedom* ([Lesson: Defining Freedom | Facing History](#)) and complete the viewing guide (Appendix A). You may choose to discuss the after viewing prompts on the guide as a class. Discuss adding information to the class list explaining freedom.

Introduce the Jim Crow Era as a second case study. Students should analyze the websites “White Only: Jim Crow in America” and “Separate but Equal: The Law of the Land” found at [americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/white-only-1.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/white-only-1.html) from the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. The guide (Appendix B) will help guide and capture students’ thinking. You may choose to discuss the final prompt on the guide as a class. Discuss adding information to the class list explaining freedom.

## Supporting Question 2

The second supporting question - How might have personal and historical events influenced Nellie Mae Rowe’s interpretation of *really free*? - has students further examine the concept of freedom by analyzing how Jim Crow, Civil Rights, and Post-Civil Rights may have influenced Nellie Mae’s life and art. By examining this question:

- **Students will understand** the complexity of freedom in the U.S.
- **Students will understand** that Black Americans lost freedoms under Jim Crow.
- **Students will understand** that the Civil Rights Era made progress towards freedom for Black Americans.
- **Students will understand** that art can be an expression of freedom.
- **Students will be able to** analyze and discuss the concepts of freedom and *really free* as they apply to U.S. citizens (Reconstruction – today).
- **Students will be able to** draw conclusions from a timeline.
- **Students will be able to** make inferences and draw conclusions from text.

Introduce the artist by having students view her work at [soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/nellie-mae-rowe](http://soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/nellie-mae-rowe) and watch the High Museum of Art’s (4:15) *Curator Video Diary: Who is Ellie Mae Rowe?* ([facebook.com/HighMuseumofArt/videos/curator-video-diary-who-is-nellie-mae-rowe/1474008222988381/](https://facebook.com/HighMuseumofArt/videos/curator-video-diary-who-is-nellie-mae-rowe/1474008222988381/)) that introduces the concept *really free*. Students should complete the viewing guide (Appendix C) for both the art and video.

Next, using the comparing timelines guide (Appendix D), students will review Jim Crow, Civil Rights, and Post-Civil Rights Era events using the following online timelines: [history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement](http://history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement)

and [history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-timeline-post-civil-rights](https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-timeline-post-civil-rights) Students are tasked with selecting and justifying significant events from each era. You may want to stipulate how many events to include on the timeline.

Continue by having students read *Interview with Nellie Mae Rowe* (Appendix E). We recommend using a jigsaw, as reflected on the guide (Appendix F). An explanation for a jigsaw can be found at [theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/jigsaw](https://theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/jigsaw). After reading, students should return to the timeline and add significant events for Nellie Mae's life. Discuss - How might have personal and historical events influenced Nellie Mae's interpretation of *really free*?

### Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question - Is there a difference between freedom and *really free* in the U.S.? - has students examine the legacies of the Civil Rights Era and compare the concepts of freedom and *really free* to our modern-day reality. By examining this question:

- **Students will understand** that the Civil Rights Era made progress towards freedom for Black Americans.
- **Students will understand** that Black Americans continue to fight for freedom.
- **Students will understand** that art can be an expression of freedom.
- **Students will be able to** construct an evidence-based claim.
- **Students will be able to** assess how understandings of freedom impact social justice.

Supporting question three requires students to engage in meaningful discussion, using guides they previously completed as references. Begin by having students consider the legacies of the Civil Rights Era. Ask - How the Civil Rights Movement changed freedom? Then show and discuss the video *What are the Legacies of the Civil Rights Movement?* ([youtube.com/watch?v=lwsEN1d0cTE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwsEN1d0cTE)).

Continue by asking - Are all U.S. citizens *really free* today? Encourage students to reference the Post-Civil Rights Era on their timelines. Additional discussion prompts include - What do you need to be free? Is freedom equal for all? Should it be? You may wish to enhance the discussion by showing clips from the PBS series *Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise*, found at [pbs.org/show/black-america-mlk-and-still-i-rise/extras/season/1](https://www.pbs.org/show/black-america-mlk-and-still-i-rise/extras/season/1). Additionally, to address marginalized voices, ask - Whose voices/stories haven't we considered?

To further the analysis of freedom and *really free*, have students read the history and purpose the *Freedom Charter*, South Africa (1955) found at [The Freedom Charter | Facing History and Ourselves](https://www.facinghistory.org/facing-history-and-ourselves/the-freedom-charter). Use the discussion prompts provided by Facing History and Ourselves to enhance discussion.

Finally, have students answer the question - Is there a difference between freedom and *really free*? - by completing a Venn Diagram supported with historical events from their timelines.

### Summative Performance Task

For this inquiry students will construct an evidence based claim answering the question - What do freedom and *really free* mean in the U.S.? Throughout this inquiry, students have been exploring the concepts of freedom and *really free* in the U.S. and gathering the evidence required to support their claim (timeline and Venn Diagram).

To extend the learning, students could explore their personal feelings about *really free*. To answer the question - What does *really free* mean to you? - Have students express their answers by creating art projects using the methods and mediums of Nellie Mae Rowe's art. Have students explain how the art piece reflects their understanding of *really free*.

### Taking Informed Action

Students are encouraged to take informed action by reflecting upon the importance of this inquiry's compelling question and expanding the conversation into the public sphere. Students could explore the benefits of U.S. citizens engaging in a conversation about freedom. Students could engage in discussion and discovery to

assess the following: Do U.S. citizens agree on the definition of freedom? Evidence? Is social justice impacted by people's understanding and application of freedom? Evidence? Whose voices/stories haven't we considered?

As a final step, have students take the conversation into the public sphere and display their claims and art pieces in a public forum to encourage people to consider the question - What do freedom and *really free* mean in the U.S.? This action empowers students to use their voice to promote civic discourse and draw awareness to important topics.

## References

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